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ABSTRACT

This report describes adult literacy needs, the role of the libraries in meeting those needs, literacy needs and services in New York, and the contributions the City University of New York (CUNY) is making to the literacy effort. Quotations from Paulo Freire and Jonathan Kozol are used to define the nature of illiteracy and its extent in the United States, and Federal Government literacy initiatives and the role of the American Library Association are reviewed. A discussion of New York State and New York City literacy needs and programs provides the context for a description of literacy programs sponsored by CUNY. Information is provided about funding levels of the CUNY literacy program, and brief descriptions of literacy programs at five of CUNY's campuses are given. The paper also includes a brief review of literacy activities at other institutions of higher education. It is concluded that CUNY libraries could serve as a bridge between the literacy classroom and the mainstream by collecting materials that would enable literacy students to make use of an academic library. (Contains 40 references.) (KRN)

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LITERACY, LIBRARIES AND THE CITY UNIVERSITY[1]

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INTRODUCTION

This past year I volunteered as a literacy tutor for the Brooklyn Public Library's Williamsburg Learning Center. I tutored an Hispanic man in his late twenties who is a beginning reader and recently found work as a porter. Excited by this one-to-one experience and interested in the issue of adult literacy and libraries, I reread Jonathan Kozol's Illiterate America (1985) and Paulo Freire's The Politics of Education (1985) and The Pedagogy of the Oppressed (c1970). Both argue that adult illiteracy is caused by the deliberate policies of oppressive governments which deny their people "address to the very soul of humanity, our common culture" (Kozol, 1985, 35-40). To be illiterate is to be

> the oppressed of all nation's everywhere who are denied a hand in their own history as they haven't access to the written word and therefore can not create the written record. Their very oppression insists on passivity in their lives. They are victims who can not shape the future (Freire, 1985, 49-54).

Having worked with peasants in northeastern Brazil, Freire insists that to break the bonds of oppression, the illiterate must be provided with the words they need to describe the exploitation which they understand but are unable to verbalize. Only by naming their oppression, can the peasants work towards a politics of change; reading, writing and analyzing will help them shape their

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culture, their history, and their future (Freire, 1990, 75-118).

In Illiterate America, Kozol accuses the government of confining its efforts in this field to investigating and reporting on the size of the problem. And even that is not certain--the Department of Education counts 23 million Americans as functionally illiterate; the Office of Vocational and Adult Education counts 74 million; the White House [September 3, 1983], 26 million; the director of the National Institute of Education [1984], 23 million; whereas the Bureau of Census says that the general population is 100% literate but that only 96% of minority groups can read and write (1985, 7-9).

Kozol states that the middle class and their institutions, the colleges and universities, look the other way on matters of illiteracy and warns that this time-bomb will eventually explode. They can protect their children in their early years of schooling, and academic institutions can insist on standards, but, eventually, the illiterate students will be in the universities,-underprepared, resentful, and demanding an education. It will be "the obligation of the universities" to remedy "the condition of the children of the cheated parents of our nation" (1985, 166).

> [H]igher academic life will be affected by the growing presence of the poorly educated and the semiliterate. Ethnic tensions consequent from this are seen already both in public institutions like the City University of New York and in private institutions such as Boston University. Even at graduate schools like Harvard Law we have seen a rapid growth of interethnic acrimony in the past five years. Nonwhite students with marginal entrance scores remain close to the bottom of the class; few are admitted to the prestigious Law Review. Recent policies that have facilitated their admission have been met with strong resistance from those students who have seen 'their' place assumed by someone who, according to

the test scores, is less qualified than they. (1985, 19)

Kozol argues that illiteracy in a country as wealthy and informationally rich as the United States is not an accident.

> Illiteracy among the poorest people in our population is a logical consequence of the kinds of schools we run, the cities that starve them, the demagogues who segregate them, and the wealthy people who escape them altogether to enroll their kids in better funded, up-to-date, and more proficient institutions. (1985, 89)

To remedy this disgrace, Kozol urges a national campaign similar to those of Castro in Cuba and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (1978, 341-377; 1985, 95).

UNESCO also compares the United States to the Third World when it comes to illiteracy.

> [T]here are some 900 million adult illiterates [in the world]--more than one quarter of the adult population--and some 140 million children who have no access to any type of education. The majority of illiterates live in developing countries and are women. However, even some highly industrialized countries are affected by the scourge of functional illiteracy which attains 10 percent or more of the adult population (1989, 1).

In its efforts to combat worldwide illiteracy, UNESCO declared the year 1990 to be International Literacy Year. Historically, early American literacy in the New England colonies was similar to that of England where tenant farmers were illiterate and unable to sign their names. Wealthier landowners were basically literate and able to sign their name. David Cressy hypothesizes that literacy follows the economic demands of local enterprise and where literacy was demanded and its fruits could be enjoyed, then "literacy was produced" (1983, 28-30).

> Illiteracy is not a disease, to be eradicated like yellow fever, but rather it is a complex cultural condition linked to expectations and circumstances and rooted in the environment.... Literacy will flourish were those who are offered it are aware of and can experience its benefits. (41)

Recently, Carl Kaestle has questioned both Kozol and Freire's contention that literacy is associated with progress and liberation. Kaestle finds that levels of literacy change as literacy expectations change and that these levels have historically been correlated with gender, race, ethnicity, and income. As higher expectations of literacy have been demanded, America has increased the years of schooling it required. "Whether that strategy for meeting literacy gaps is sufficient today is doubtful, though schools continue to be the major arena for training in literacy" (1991, xviii).

NATIONAL SCENE

The United States House of Representatives' Committee on Education and Labor held hearings on the proposed Adult Literacy and Employability Act in 1989. The Committee reviewed federal initiatives on illiteracy which include the Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Library Services and Construction Act, the Federal Literacy Initiative, and the Educational Act and Bilingual Vocational Training (U.S. House, 1989, p. 93). These acts were supplemented by the Hawkins-Stafford Act of 1988, PL 100-297. Title I of the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) provides funding for library-based literacy

projects. In 1984, Congress amended LSCA and supported increased library activities: Title IV allows for direct LSCA grants to state and local public libraries for literacy projects. Local literacy efforts are funded by state and federal funds and are supplemented by such private efforts as that of The Business Council for Effective Literacy, B. Dalton Booksellers, and Time, Inc. Unfortunately, Congress found private assistance to be "minuscule" (U. S. House, 1986, p. 96).

Another federal initiative was sponsored unsuccessfully by Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy who introduced his bill for the Literacy Corps in 1987. In the bill, he estimated that

> 23 million Americans are too illiterate to read the poison warning on a can of pesticide, a letter from their child's teacher, the headline of a daily newspaper, or the first amendment of the Constitution. Thirty-five million more Americans are semi-illiterate--they read so poorly that the can barely function at a survival level in our society....
> In fact, America ranks a disgraceful 49th in literacy among 159 members of the United Nations. We need a comprehensive strategy to fight against illiteracy, but so far we are doing very little....
> Current Federal, state, municipal, and private literacy programs reach only about 4 percent of the illiterate population (U.S. Senate, 1987, pp. 1-2).

Senator Kennedy offered an alternative, the Literacy Corps, which encourage college students to become tutors in local public schools for college credit. Students would serve as tutors in Head Start programs, jails, etc. He imagined that 1,000 colleges and universities would participate (U.S. Senate, 1987, 2)

In 1988, Congress held hearings on the state of American education and agreed with the educational experts that the current education system was no longer serving students. In The Education

Deficit (1988), the American system of education is likened to an outdated assemblyline in which

> the old basics, the routinized computation sort of basic decoding or reciting text skills ... has contributed to the creation of a work force ill-prepared to meet the demands of a highly technical and sophisticated industrial complex. (U.S. Congress, 1988, 22)

The committee's investigation found that an estimated 13 percent of America's 17-years-olds were illiterate. This figure more than doubled for minorities. The committee estimated a loss of $25 billion to the economy in reduced productivity, "accidents, damage to equipment, and government support programs."

> Further, it is estimated that some 17 to 21 million adults cannot read. State estimates vary between 6 percent in Utah to 16 percent in the District of Columbia, Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, and Texas. Of illiterate adults, approximately 60 percent are from minority backgrounds, 30 percent are over 60 years old, and 70 percent of the native English speakers who are illiterate had dropped out of school before completing high school. (U.S. Congress, 1988, 22-23)

The committee doubted that even high school graduates were able to perform more than perfunctory tasks and believed that even the achievement of functional literacy masked the lack of productive skills.

Similar findings have been reported by the Joint Economic Committee and by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Inc., [NAEP] which published The Nation's Report Card (1987). The NAEP reported that only 11 percent of high school students can properly read a bus schedule, only 10 percent can compute the cost of a meal from a menu or find information in a news article, and a mere 5 percent can understand specialized material likely to be

found in a professional or technical working environment. The committee concluded that education in America today fails to make literate increasing numbers of at-risk students because it adheres to outmoded education methodology and teaches irrelevant subject matter (U.S. Congress, 1988, 23-24).

Not only is the educational system deficient but the federal government's commitment to dealing with the challenge of illiteracy is weak. Writing for the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, Forrest Chisman observes that the federal government is failing to acknowledge the role of adult illliteracy in America's inability to remain economically viable in a global economy. He questions whether America will be able to maintain its standard of living and support its aging population unless a forceful national effort is made to upgrade adult basic skills (1989, iii).

Chisman recommends the establishment of a cabinet level position on adult literacy, legislative initiatives, and an adult basic skills act and greater emphasis on workforce literacy (v-vi).

The American Library Association and Literacy Efforts

In her recent presidential inaugural address to the American Library Association (ALA), Pat Schuman, speaks of the "future of the American people's right to know (1)" and the obstacle to this basic right presented by "the shocking rate of illiteracy in both children and adults ... the widening gap between the information

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rich and the information poor" (1991, 2).

ALA's long interest in literacy is marked by its early commitment to adult education. In 1925, ALA established the Commission of Library and Adult Education. Helen Lyman argues in Literacy and the Nation's Libraries (1977) that

> [e]very library in the country--no matter what its size, function, objectives, and resources--has a role to play in the national literacy effort.... The three primary roles of libraries in literacy efforts are education, collaboration and community awareness. (25-26)

Between 1979 and 1981 ALA trained nearly 1,000 librarians in techniques for conducting literacy programs (ALA, January 1986, 4). In 1985 it organized the Coalition for Literacy, a group of eleven organizations which sponsored a national, multi-media campaign and provided a free hotline to link tutors, programs and students. "A top priority of the ALA is to continue its efforts to make the entire country aware of the adult illiteracy problem" (ALA, 1986, 4-5).

Under a Department of Education grant supplemented by funds from Bell, Atlantic, Inc., ALA sponsors the "Family Literacy: Models for Service." This program approaches adult illiteracy through the family and provides learning opportunities for parents and their children. The Family Literacy Project concentrates on the mid-Atlantic states of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia. IBM is another corporate sponsor and contributes more than $300,000 in software and equipment for 12 public and college libraries to enhance their literacy programs. Another program, ALA's "National

Partners for Libraries and Literacy" links ALA and 62 national organizations who wish to support libraries and literacy. ALA's Office for Library Outreach Services also promotes the development of library literacy programs at the local level (ALA, n.d. "Literacy, Libraries and You").

In Libraries and Literacy Education Douglas Zweizig, et al., report on the survey of public libraries, public school libraries, community college libraries, state institutional libraries, and nonprofit agencies cooperating with libraries. They found that the "provision of materials was the most common literacy activity carried out by libraries." Other activities included "literacy instruction and literacy support services" (1988 chap. 1, 4-12). They concluded that public libraries are the "predominant type of library for the delivery of literacy services (Executive Summary, 2-3)."

New York and The City University of New York

In the early 1980s New York state began its literacy effort in earnest. Senator Roy Goodman of the New York State Senate's Committee on Investigations and Taxation held hearings at which New York City's Mayor, Edward Koch, and the Board of Education's Chancellor, Anthony Alvarado, described the need for literacy services in New York where immigrants and in-migrants from the rural south and Puerto Rico comprised twenty percent of the city's population and swelled the numbers of illiterates.

Goodman finds that New York State's funding of literacy services ranks 29th out of the 50 states. "New York spends only 72 cents per pupil on adult illiteracy programs compared to a national average of $6.55." He calculates the high cost of illiteracy in New York in welfare and prison costs, and unfilled jobs (New York State, 3).

For statistical purposes, the New York State Department of Education classifies individuals over the age of 18 who have not completed eight years of education as functionally illiterate. Using information from the 1980 Census, then, the Department has estimated that there are now 2,040,238 illiterate individuals in the State of New York (N.Y., 1984, 6).

The committee concluded that the State Board of Regents should assign a high priority to combatting adult illiteracy by increasing funding, working with the public libraries, having colleges provide work-study grants for literacy tutoring and granting academic credit to students who tutor adult illiterates (N.Y., 1984, pp. 4-5).

New York City's efforts to provide literacy services emanate from the Mayor's Office of Youth Services. In 1984, New York City

> allocated $35 million in Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC) funds to be used over a four-year period to support the expansion and improvement of literacy services for older youth and adults in New York City. (Literacy, 1991, p. 7)

In fiscal 1985, $13 million dollars were made available to support literacy services in the city. The State Education Department together with Mayor Koch's office developed program and funding guidelines to include three programmatic areas: developing the

literacy services provided by the New York City Board of Education, the City University of New York and not-for-profit agencies; establishing auxiliary literacy services within the three public library systems; and providing for intensive staff development and technical assistance for literacy programs (Literacy 1991, 8-9). Finally, an independent agency, the Literacy Assistance Center, was contracted to provide centralized referral, staff development and technical assistance and information services.

CUNY's Office of Academic Affairs, Division of Adult and Continuing Education, promotes literacy education as

> a major University initiative, serving over 8,500 students per year on fourteen campuses. In 1989-1990, the University received $3.6 million under the Adult Education Act/New York State Education Department and the New York City Mayor's Office to provide basic education and English as a Second Language instruction to out-of-school youth and adults. (BHE Activities Summary, 6-91)

Total funding for the Division of Adult and Continuing Education, CUNY Board of Higher Education for FY 1988-1989 was $11,234,542 (City University of New York, 1988-1989, 19). Historically, literacy instruction at City University began in the early seventies under the Right to Read Act.

At CUNY-Brooklyn College, Dr. Christine Persico, who heads the Division of Continuing Education, reaches three-to-four hundred students a semester in programs for Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, and preparation for the GED. The program's aim is raise students' reading to an eighth grade level and to encourage interest in a college education. Ellen Ray, coordinator of the Program for Adult Learning, writes in her annual report that

the literacy program at Brooklyn College made extensive use of the Brooklyn Public Library's collection and used both Brooklyn Public Brooklyn College libraries as study halls. (Annual Report, 1990, 19)

In FY 1991-1992 the program at Brooklyn College was funded at the level of $2 million. The money was spent on twenty classes offered each semester, training, classroom instruction and materials. Unfortunately, no money was given to the Brooklyn College Library for professional or student materials nor does the college library participate in the program. The library is used as a study hall by the students, and as a resource when the public library's learning sites are closed.

Literacy activity at other CUNY campuses vary. At Hunter College, internships are offered masters candidates in the TESOL program. LaGuardia Community College enrolls 27,000 students in continuing education classes each year. Bronx Community College has developed programs for students who are jobless or are single parents or high school dropouts. The Borough of Manhattan Community College "hosts a literacy program targeted at the more than one million New Yorkers who cannot functionally read or write" (CUNY, 1990, 3). Staten Island's continuing education program is aimed at their senior citizens who are encouraged to continue their education and to "engage in enrichment activities."

At CUNY's New York City Technical College launched an intergenerational literacy project. Four hundred students without high school diplomas or general education equivalency diplomas,

half reading below the fifth grade level, were recruited to participate in after hours workshops to develop literacy skills while reading children's literature (Handel, 1988). Other efforts at City University include working with the City Volunteer Corps whose high school students participate in an education component in addition to their community service. Working through the Board of Higher Eduction, CUNY assists welfare recipients and provides youth internships, etc.

Other Higher Education Initiatives

California has declared literacy initiatives as part of its master plan for higher education (California, 1987). Harvard's School of Education in cooperation with the university's Reading Laboratory established the Harvard Adult Literacy Initiative. This program trains teachers, develops materials for instruction, and methods of assessment and evaluation. Harvard offers a three-credit course to both graduates and undergraduates who train as literacy volunteers (Henry, 1990). Pennsylvania State University maintains the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy (Forlizzi, 1989). City University's Lehman College sponsors a similar institute, the Institute for Literacy Studies (City University of New York, 1987).

The state of Virginia mandates its community college system to be the main provider of the workplace literacy training considered

essential for the state's economic development (Lightfield, 1989). Boston University, Macalester College, Northwestern University, SUNY-Oswego, Rice University, Stanford University, and the University of Pennsylvania have literacy action programs to serve their local communities as well (Meachan, 1987).

Other colleges and universities offer work-study activities in literacy as part of the National Adult Literacy Initiative: Boston University, Princeton University, Columbia University, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, the University of Southern California at Los Angeles, Wayne State, and SUNY-Brockport were among the participating institutions (Nickse, 1984).
The library at New York City Technical College, a community college in the City University's system, was granted money to provide a children's literature collection for its intergenerational literacy project (1984). The library departments at the remaining 22 units within the City University of New York, including senior colleges, community colleges, the Graduate Center, and the CUNY Law School, do not participate in their college's literacy efforts.

CONCLUSION

With millions being spent on literacy initiatives to encourage reading on the campuses of City University, libraries should be able to participate in these literacy efforts. The libraries could receive funding from these grants to create professional literacy collections and to establish student collections. This would

encourage collection building in a broad range of materials for both teachers and students. Academic libraries could serve as a bridge from the literacy classroom to the mainstream of the college campus by providing students with materials they could read and encouraging them to make use of an academic library. In this way academe may begin to move from the indifference Kozol describes to ameliorating the shame of illiteracy as well as reducing campus tension by providing a mainstream service to a growing population of adults.

My student and I have resumed our weekly reading sessions after a 2 month break. I have spoken with him about my frustrations with his progress and have asked him about his reading goals. He has decided that we should focus on history and we have begun to read about trolley-cars which are popular in Puerto Rico. In addition, he has agreed to do an hour's homework a week. These changes might assist his progress. But I am reminded that both Freire and Kozol found the small group instructional experience to be preferable to one-to-one tutoring for teaching the beginning reader. Interestingly enough, my experience with individual tutoring sessions leads me to believe that they are probably right and that small groups setting would provide a more dynamic setting for learning. As an academic librarian, I think the logical placement of such a program is the college campus.

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